

AN ANALYSIS OF *PIANO VARIATIONS*

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A CREATIVE PROJECT

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Analysis of *Piano Variations*

The idea of variation in music is fascinating, as it is among the most common ways to develop a musical idea. The common trait among the greatest composers of every era is that they all had a unique and interesting way of developing and varying their ideas. The music of Haydn, for instance, although heavily monothematic, keeps the listener engaged and interested because the composer was able to develop his ideas in such a way that the music is never predictable. Haydn developed his music so masterfully that even his simplest ideas seem like new ideas. He achieves this by manipulating phrase structure, by treating melodies differently, or even by writing ‘surprise’ harmonic progressions. In some cases, different movements were connected by the minutest detail, for instance, only a few intervals. To the listener, these connections are not easily recognizable; however, a thorough analysis can reveal that at the core, the foundation of so much music can be only a few ideas. This is the very essence of variation: taking the smallest amount of material that one can take and spinning from that as much music as possible. This was my philosophy and approach when composing my *Piano Variations*. I also wanted my theme to be as short as possible so I could further hone what I consider to be the most important skill as a composer.

In order to compose the shortest amount of material I could think of, I decided to write a single tone row, but not being very interested in serial or atonal music, I wrote a tonal tone row. This resulted in a four bar theme as seen in Fig. 1.

My goal was to write approximately twenty minutes of music based on this theme, and to present the first variations in a tonal level, and the latter variations presented in a less recognizable manner. Necessarily, I would have to treat the theme in multiple ways, including tonally, atonally, intervallically, motivically, rhythmically, harmonically, and in pitch-class sets. Finally, to add more variance to the set, I chose to compose each variation in a different style, reflecting traits of different genres.

Fig. 1: Theme (mm.1-4)

In order to do this, I first had to analyze the theme itself. A motivic analysis of this theme reveals that it is comprised of three different motives. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the opening Motive A combines with the ascending minor-third gesture (spelled as an augmented second) (B) and forms the only phrase within the Motive AB. What follows (C) is reminiscent of what one might refer to as a Messiaen-like bird call. It does not make a phrase, but it provides a nice contrasting afterthought to the opening two measures. Incidentally, the pitches from the start of m. 2 until the B-natural in m. 3 create the tone row.

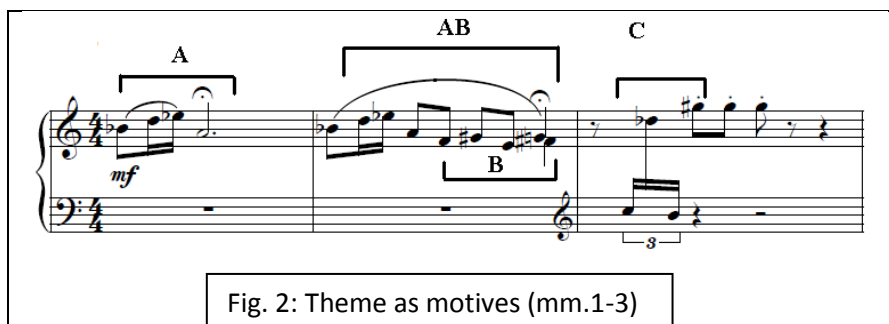
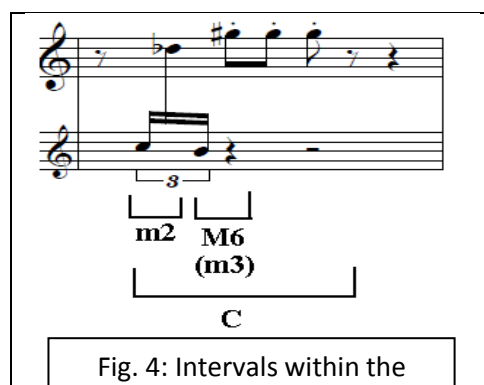
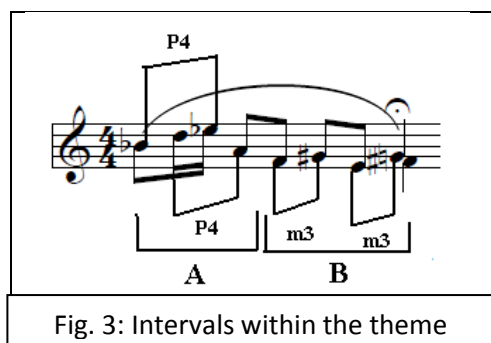


Fig. 2: Theme as motives (mm.1-3)

This kind of analysis allowed me to write variations that provide the listener with “recognizable themes” (or motives). In order to vary the theme, I analyzed the theme intervallically. This provided me with the information necessary to create harmonies that are implied by the theme (Fig. 3).

Doing this, I realized that the main intervals that drive motive AB is the perfect fourth (P4) and the minor third (m3). Motive A can be seen as two perfect fourths a minor second apart, and motive B can be seen is two minor thirds a minor second apart (One of the minor thirds is spelled as an augmented second, and the F[#] is not considered part of the theme, rather it is a coloristic addition to the B motive). Motive C is made up of a minor-second cluster and a leap of a major sixth, which inverted is another minor third. Thus, the entire theme can be seen as minor seconds, minor thirds, and perfect fourths. This allowed me to construct harmonies in several of the variations, which provide for less key-oriented presentations of the theme. Also, each motive is linked by a gesture that includes a descending minor second from the first pitch of the motive. This includes B \flat →A, F→E, and C→B within Motive A, B and C respectively.



Finally, to get the farthest away that I could from a tonal presentation of the theme, I analyzed this using some tools of pitch-class set theory (Fig. 5). By doing this, I looked at each motive (A, B, and C) as a set rather than as tonal gestures. This provided me with a way to develop the theme using the same intervallic material but in a non-traditional way. By analyzing the theme in these various ways, I now had the tools necessary to compose the variations.

Formally, Variation I, consists of an introduction, followed by two statements of AB, and then a repeated statement of A. In this variation, an interval in motive A gets expanded transforming it from [0156] to [0157]. The variation starts with an atmospheric introduction constructed by [0156] (A) sounded twice followed by two statements of [0134] (B) to prepare for the entrance of the melodic material, comprised of Motive AB. Thus when Motive A appears in the right hand, the arpeggiated harmonic content surrounding it is [0156] and when Motive B appears in the right hand, the harmonic content surrounding it is [0134] (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 5: Theme using set theory

This is how the entire variation is treated, but for one exception. Measure 19 contains both A (this time, in an intervallically contracted form [0145]) and B occurs simultaneously and somewhat contrapuntally. Therefore, I chose to use pitches that amount to [0124], a variation of motive C (see Fig. 7).

Var. I: Slowly, with expression
♩ = 63
LH *sim.*
ppp

From B with added color note

0156 (A) 0156 (A) 0134 (B) 0134 (B)

AB

0156 (Expansion of (A)) 0134 (B)

0156 0156 0134 0134

Fig. 6: Var. I (mm. 5-12)

0145 (contraction of 0156)

0134

0124

Fig. 7: Var. I (m. 19)

Var. II - Bouncy and Lightly
♩ = 69

0125 (C)

30

0156 (A)

0134 (B)

Fig. 8: Var. II (mm. 30-32)

36

p

Key: D 0156 Key: C 0156

pp

Theme (C)

Theme (AB)

Key: G

Descending Bass Line

Fig. 9: Var. II (mm. 36-51)

Variation III also treats the theme in a pointillistic manner. Similar to the preceding variation, the outer voices all make up motive A [0156]. Also, similar to the first variation, the melodic notes determine the inner arpeggiation notes that make up the computer “blips” (see Figs. 10 and 11). This was the foundation for this particular variation, although notes were sometimes left out or changed to obtain a better-sounding effect. While the pitch set from motive C does not appear in this variation, its rhythmic gesture of three staccato eighth notes does appear in the middle of the variation used to connect the larger “AB” together (see Fig. 12).

4 Var. III - Andante (Mimic Computer Blips)
non legato

83 ♩ = 48

0156

0156

0156

0156

0156

Fig. 10: Var. III (mm. 83-84) Motive A in outer voices and arpeggios)

0134

0134

0134

Fig. 11: Var. III (mm. 87-88) Motive (B) in outer voices and arpeggios)

89

pp

3

Fig. 12: Var. III mm.89-90 (top) shown with the "Bird Call rhythm" from theme, m. 3 (bottom)

Variation IV is the first to be written in what could be considered a strict ternary form. The variation relies heavily on a left-hand ostinato made up of [0156] from motive A while the right hand melody has a contracted form of this same motive [0145] (see Fig. 13).

This variation shows the influence of the music of Prokofiev, with the use of ostinato, rhythmic intensification which plays a heavy role in the B section, use of tritone and minor-ninth harmonies (see Fig. 14) and extreme register jumps (see Figs. 14 and 15).

0145 (A) 0134 (B)

107

0134 (B)

Fig. 13: Var. IV mm. 107-108

Variation V, similar to the preceding variation, contracts motive A into [0145], but now presents this in the context of G major.

133

mf

mp

Tritone Harmony (F#-C)

Implied minor 9th harmony

Fig. 14: Var. IV mm. 133-137. Rhythmic intensification through time signature changes in the development section with dissonant harmonies. Left hand has extreme register jumps and cross-hand phrases.

115

132

mp

151

Fig. 15: Var. IV: Examples of extreme Prokofievian register jumps

0145 (A)

3 4 5 2

Key: cm

Var. IV

0145 (A)

1 #2 3 7

106

Key: GM

Var. V

Fig. 16: Comparison of how melodic notes function with different harmonic layout.

Also similar to Variation IV, this variation is in ternary form. The B section of this variation contains a left-hand presentation of melodic material from the Section A, only here it is

in the key of the subdominant. Flat-nine harmonies were used throughout this section, which was influenced by music of George Gershwin (see Fig. 17). The A section returns in E-flat major, but ultimately resolves to G major, where it concludes with more Gershwin-esque harmonies (see Fig. 18).

181

Bb with implied b9

185

C #9 (D# spelled as Eb)

Fig. 17: Var. V, measure 181 (left) and mm. 185-186 (right) showing Gershwin-influenced harmonies

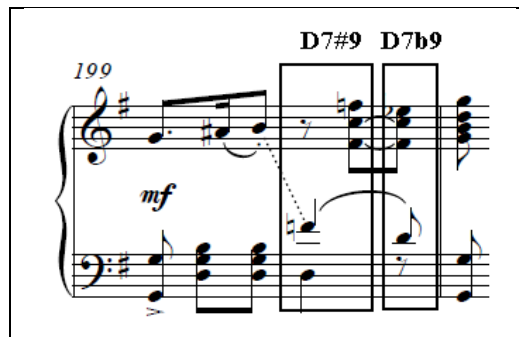


Fig. 18: Var. V mm. 199-200, showing more Gershwin-influenced harmonies. The D7#9 was spelled with an F-natural due to the melody note and so the pianist would not see E# resolve to Eb in the upper register.

As mentioned in the introduction the sixth variation in the set treats the theme intervallically, so harmonies could be constructed using the intervals from the theme. The ostinato that is used is built of a perfect fourth rising by a minor second, which outlines the intervals from motive A ([0156]). Gradually, motive B is introduced under the ostinato first as a melodic rising minor third, then as harmonic minor thirds descending by minor seconds (see Figs 19 and 20). Eventually, as shown in Fig. 20, the minor-third motive is combined with motive A's harmonic perfect fourth, creating a diminished-major 7th harmony. Tension is built as the bird-call motive is used to move material higher in register while simultaneously these new harmonies crescendo into a statement of motive A marked *fff*. A statement of motive B follows this harmonized with perfect fourths from motive A and with the bird calls from motive C as background subtleties (see Figs.21 and 22). This continues until the variation concludes.

**2 P4s a m2 apart
(0156) from A**

Descending m2 from A, B, C

**minor 3rd motive
from Theme (B)**

Fig 19: Var. VI mm.205-207

Harmony built by P4 (from A) and m3 (from B) = e^0M7 chord

**descending minor
3rds a minor 2nd
apart from B**

Fig. 20: Var. VI m. 214

Variation VII is an invention in the style of J.S. Bach. As illustrated in Fig. 23, motive AB makes up the invention's subject, while motive C makes up the countersubject. This combined makes for an interesting exposition, as the second statement of the subject enters on the chromatic mediant of the key. After this four-measure exposition, the development begins.

**Chords built with P4 and
m3 rising by m2 (A+B)
(Results in diminished-Major 7 chords)**

D-Eb-A = 016
from 0156 (A)

0134 (B)

0125 (C)

215

cresc.

fff

Fig. 21: Var. VI: mm215-217

**Ascending m3 motive from (B)
harmonized with P4 from (A)
(Becomes new ostinato)**

0145 from (A)

218

mf LH

ppp

mp

p

Bird call reiterated a minor second apart
(minor seconds link (A), (B), and (C))

Ascending m3 from (B)

Fig. 22: Var. VI mm. 218-219

The rhythm of Motive A provides the drive throughout the entire development section, as it is always presented in its strict form (long-short-short-long-long) or one varied form (short-short-long-long-long). This development


implements, three compositional devices from Bach. The first is the use of pedal points. Pedal points appear twice within this variation (see Fig. 24). Another idea taken from Bach is the recapitulation entering in the subdominant key, not unlike what happens in Bach's B^b minor prelude (BWV 891) from the *Well-Tempered Clavier Book II* (see Fig. 25). And lastly, the famous e-minor fugue from Bach's *WTC Book I* (BWV 855) employs a unique and somewhat comical measure (at least from a contrapuntal

standpoint) towards the end of the piece, Bach throws away all counterpoint, and writes one-and-one-third measure of sheer parallel octaves as if to say, “Enough! Let’s just end this!” This was pointed out to me during a composition lesson, and so I decided to borrow this device and write a phrase of parallel sixths in the same vein (see Fig. 26).

Fig. 23: Var. VII mm. 235-238

Fig. 24: Var. VII mm. 246-251 (top) and mm. 262-264 (bottom). Shows use of pedal points

Variation VIII is also in a loose ternary form, and focuses mainly on [0156] from motive A. It is also the first of three variations that treat the thematic material mainly using pitch-set variation rather than tonal variation. Following a four-measure introduction of oscillating [0156] material, the A section enters with more [0156] material presented in the right hand, against motive B's falling minor thirds, which are harmonized with motive A's perfect fourth (see Fig. 27). The B section enters with a presentation of motive A immediately followed by fast repeating sixteenth notes. These notes foreshadow the toccata variation which immediately follows Variation VIII. The [012] from motive C also appears once, used to separate two utterances of motive A (see Fig. 28).



The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt, labeled 'Recapitulation of Var. VII mm 266-269 on IV (Eb Major)', shows a four-measure introduction in the bass clef with oscillating eighth notes, followed by a right-hand melody in the treble clef featuring a series of eighth notes with accidentals. The bottom excerpt, labeled 'Recapitulation of Bach's Bb minor Prelude (BWV 891) mm. 55-59, on iv (eb minor)', shows a similar four-measure introduction in the bass clef, followed by a right-hand melody in the treble clef with a more complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. Both excerpts are in E-flat major/E-flat minor and 3/4 time.

Recapitulation of Var. VII mm 266-269 on IV (Eb Major)


Recapitulation of Bach's Bb minor Prelude (BWV 891) mm. 55-59, on iv (eb minor)

Fig. 25: Var. VII mm. 266-269 (top) and Bach's Bb minor Prelude BWV 891 mm. 55-59 (bottom)

The second half of the B section contains motive A [0156] being played against falling sixteenth notes also made up of [0156] (see Fig. 29). The variation concludes with the [0156] gesture from the A section escalating until it reaches its key-center arrival on A, which functions as dominant of the next variation.


Variation IX, the toccata was inspired by two famous toccatas: Prokofiev's *Toccata* op. 11, and Ravel's toccata from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The key was chosen as homage to Prokofiev's *Toccata* op. 14, in d minor, and the figure from mm. 333-334 was modeled after Ravel's toccata (see Fig. 30).

End of Bach's E minor fugue (BWV 855)



Parallel octaves(!)

End of Var. VII



Parallel 6ths from Bach's Parallel Octaves 'stunt' in his em fugue

Fig. 26: Bach's e minor Fugue BWV 855 use of parallel octaves (top), and Var. VII's use of parallel 6ths

Fig. 27: Var. VIII mm. 286-287 (top) and mm. 289-290 (bottom)

Structurally, this toccata variation is also in ternary form. The A section opens with a dissonant harmony constructed of [0156], followed by a statement of a permutation of [0145], the pitch set derived by contracting an interval [0156]. These statements are harmonized by using the minor seconds, which link all three motives

from the original theme (see Fig. 31). As a foreshadowing of the B section, a measure of two statements of [0156] is presented. These two [0156] statements are linked by holding “D” invariant (see Fig. 32). The A section concludes with a reiteration of [0156] presented in “D” which cadences as dominant to “G”, the tonal center of the B section.

Fig. 28: Var. VIII mm. 295-296

The B section enters with repeated statements of [0156] all centered around “G”, and is then followed by the descending third taken from motive B (see Fig. 33). The second half of the

B section contains a combination of motive C and motive B before the recapitulation.

Just as the first A section started in D and cadenced on its subdominant, the recapitulation does likewise, entering on G, and cadencing on C.

Variation X was inspired by Scriabin's *Etude no. 3* from his *Eight Etudes*, op. 42. The coloristic approach that Scriabin took was borrowed and applied to this variation, as illustrated in Fig. 34. Structurally, this variation could be considered as AAB. The pitch

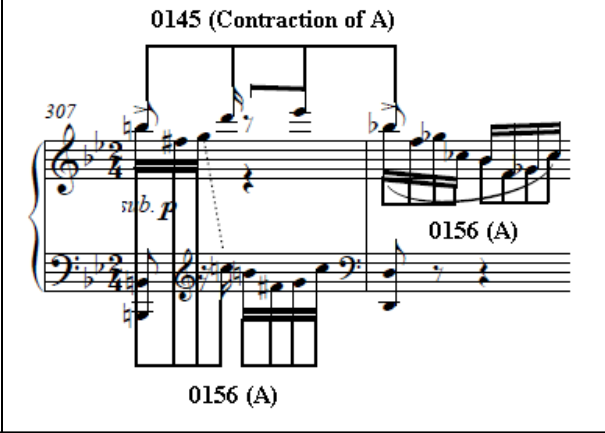


Fig. 29: Var. VIII mm. 307-308

material in the left hand is all derived from [0156], while the three-note figures in the right hand are [012] from motive C. Also, in the opening measure, the first sixteenth note of each three-note group outlines [0156], which was the compositional genesis for this the phrases in this section although it was not always strictly employed (see Fig. 35).

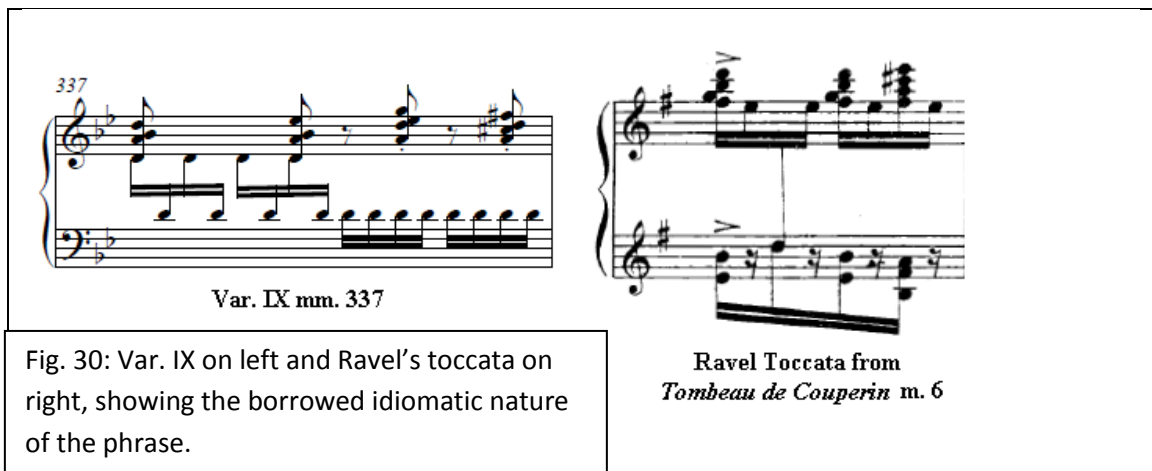


Fig. 30: Var. IX on left and Ravel's toccata on right, showing the borrowed idiomatic nature of the phrase.

The material for the B section is more freely derived, but still restricted to using the same sets that were used for the A section. The left hand always plays [0156] and

climbs up chromatically from C[#] to B-natural, while the right hand is always playing [012] (see Fig. 36). The variation concludes with repeated notes outlining [0156] agogically arriving to the Finale of the set (see Fig. 37).

0156 (A) harmony

D = Tonal center from Prokofiev's op. 11

0145 (Contraction of [0156] (A))

Fig. 31: Var. IX mm. 331-333 showing structural pitches treated as pitch-class sets

0156 (A) in dm

0156 (A) in DM

Fig. 32: Var. IX m. 336 shows the two [0156] sets that tonally center around "D"

The finale or Variation XI is a through-composed variation that is a hybrid of material from several of the previous variations. The opening of the variation consists of seven bars that contain a repeated statement of motive A harmonized

with [0156] against a bass line of [0145], the contracted version of motive A (see Fig. 38).

0156 (A)

Descending 3rd from (B)

Fig. 33: Var. IX: mm. 346-347 shows Motive A and (B) linked together

Prestissimo · M.M. ♩ = 76

ppp

Var. X - sneaky and eerily with rubato*
♩ = 88

ppp

362

pp

Fig. 34: Scriabin Etude Op. 42 no. 3 (top) and Var. X mm.362-363 (bottom)

0156 (A)

362

012 (C)

pp

0156 (A)

0156 (A)

0135 - Variation of 0156

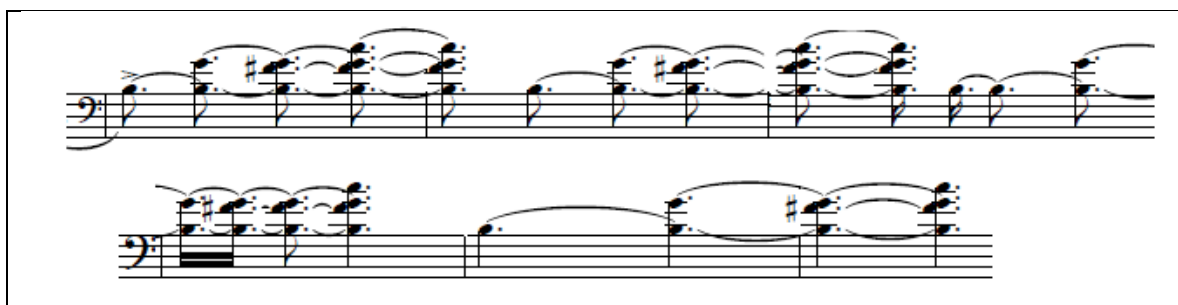
0156 (A)

0156 (A)

Fig. 35: Var X mm. 362-365 shows organization of pitch material

Circled notes show ascending chromatic line from C# to B natural in Left Hand

Fig. 36: Var X mm. 374-385 shows left hand notes chromatically rising



The image displays a musical score for Variation X, measures 384-389. It consists of two staves, both in bass clef. The top staff contains a series of chords and single notes, with some notes tied across measures. The bottom staff shows a more complex texture with multiple voices, including some chords and single notes. The notation includes various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and dynamic markings. The overall style is characteristic of late 19th or early 20th-century music.

Fig. 37: Var. X mm. 384-389 shows agogic repetition of the [0156] set in left hand

What follows is a series of statements and interruptions comprised of different variations from the whole piece. The march from Variation V starts this section, giving its first of two appearances with dissonant harmonies until it crescendos into a Lisztian swell into the lower depths of the piano at which point the ostinato from Variation VI emerges. This ostinato rises to the top of the piano where Variation VIII makes a statement, only to be interrupted by Variation VI's ostinato, which in turn, is interrupted by the concluding statement of Variation VIII (see Fig. 39). This statement is then interrupted by a violent statement of Motive A filled with minor ninth and minor second dissonances before cadencing on D, which functions as V of the next interruption, a presentation taken from the toccata, Variation IX.

Var. XI - Finale

390 $\text{♩} = 52$

pp

0156 Harmony

0145 (contraction of A)

0156 (A)

ff

From Var. X

pp very delicately

Expands to 0156 harmony

395

ff *mf* *ff*

From Var. III (Computer Blips)

Fig. 38: Var. XI mm. 390-392 (top) and mm. 395-396 (bottom) shows pitch material

The toccata statement plunges into the lower depths of the piano, where the ostinato from Variation VI once again emerges. This is again interrupted by the last utterance of the march from Variation V (the same interrupting material used before, only harmonized differently). This erupts into another Lisztian swell, this time cadencing on D, which functions as V of G, the key of the coda. While centered on D, several bursts up and down the keyboard appear, reminiscent of the “computer blips” gesture from Variation III, which are completely overridden by [0156] and some instances of subset of it [015]. The variation finally cadences into the Coda in G Major (see Fig. 40).

Var. VI ostinato

Var. VIII (interrupted)

404 $\text{♩} = 108$

p

ff

$\text{♩} = 98$

Var. VI ostinato

Var. VIII (concluded)

407 $\text{♩} = 108$

p

cresc.

poco accel.

$\text{♩} = 98$

Var. VIII (concluded)

Theme (A) - 0156

410 $\text{♩} = 98$

ff

ff

forceful and broadening

espress.

Elision into statement of Theme (A)

Taken from Var. III (computer blips)

Fig. 39: Var. XI mm. 404-412 shows a series of interruptions of material from previous variations

The Coda, marked *bittersweet with cliché* is dominated by motive A throughout. After a fourteen-measure introduction based on motive A, the tempo increases and an eighth-note triplet inner-line appears against octave bass notes. This section has several different musical clichés, one being a chord progression drawn from pop-music, namely the I-iii-IV (see Fig. 41).

Lisztian swell into final cadence

421 *molto accel and cresc.*

423 *drastically slow down and broaden*

424

425

D=V/G

RH

V/G

Fig. 40: Var. XI mm. 421-425

A further cliché appears with the introduction of the bombastic triplet gospel-swing chords in m. 449, and culminating in m. 459 in the final key of the piece, D Major. The harmonic layout of these triplet chords makes up the ‘line cliché’ within the major key, a progression typical in jazz and pop that has a descending line moving chromatically down from the tonic of a chord to the sixth scale degree (see Figs. 42 and 43). (It should be noted that I did consider modulating the music up a half-step to reach its fullest cliché potential, but I chose against it---I felt that it would be *too* cliché).

GM: I iii IV

Fig. 41: Coda mm. 439-441 shows pop chord progression adding to the cliché of the Coda

461

Chord Name: DM DM7 D7 G/D

Bracketed notes show chromatic line descending from 1 to 6

Fig. 42: Coda mm. 461-464 containing gospel swing feel with line cliché in underlying chords

The coda concludes with a bombastic plagal cadence, which is widely associated with church music. However, to end this variation set with such a traditional ending seems to detract from the contemporary language used throughout the majority of the piece, so instead, the plagal cadence is used as a deceptive cadence to what could be called a second coda. To break the cliché sounding gospel variation, the piece ends with two bursts of the [0156] set, outlining a $D^{-b5-b9-added-11}$ chord and a $DM7-added-11$ chord, respectively (see Fig. 44).

Opening 4 bars of *In Walked Bud* Composed by Thelonious Monk

Fig. 43: Opening bars of Thelonious Monk's *In Walked Bud*, showing the line cliché as used in jazz

468 *molto express.* $\text{♩} = 96$

fff

Plagal "Church" Cadence

Ped.

0156 (Db5b9 add 11)

DM7 add 11

Fig. 44: Coda mm. 468-471, showing the false ending and the real ending

One of my goals when composing this set of variations was to write individual pieces that sounded completely different than the rest of set. Unlike many other variation sets, which tend to be in the same style (generally in the style the composer), I wanted to write variations that reflected completely different styles and genres of music, which is why I included elements of marches, toccata, baroque counterpoint, and other types of music. By doing so, I felt that I could write a long set of variations that reflected different styles, genres, and even composers, but incorporating my own stylistic language. The end result, I feel, is a set of variations that take the listener on a journey through different musical time periods with my own compositional twists, which makes for an interesting and entertaining piece of music.